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ABSTRACT

Stress in organizations continues to be of interests to researchers in industrial psychology, organizational behavior, and human resources development. This study examined the effects on stress of an individual's social support and hardiness in a work environment. Subjects were 90 employees of an industrial firm and 50 undergraduate students who worked part-time. Sixty-eight subjects (49%) completed useable questionnaires measuring stress, perceived stress, social support, and hardiness. Results showed that, for subjects receiving low levels of social support, an increase in work stress was associated with increased perceptions of stress. However, for subjects receiving high levels of social support, increasing work stress was not associated with notable increases in perceived stress. Results of this research support the theoretical concept that social support can moderate stress effects. Managers are in a position to encourage or prevent the development of social support on the job. Implications of the research can be readily applied through management action. (Five figures are included.) (ABL)

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Stress in the Work Environment: An Examination of Social Support and Hardiness

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Stress in organizations continues to be of interest to researchers in industrial psychology, organizational behavior, and human resources development. (A number of recent textbooks on these topics now devote an entire chapter to work stress.) Earlier research documented and categorized the various sources of stress associated with work and common strain responses. More recent work, reflecting the maturity of this research area, has focused upon model building, integration, and the identification of moderator variables. (Beehr & Bhagat, 1985)

The research reported here provides an examination of two factors that have received attention recently. These are social support and the personality construct, hardiness (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983). Given a number of workers, all exposed to job-related stress, the question is: What factors differentiate between those workers who show stress effects and those who do not? It was hypothesized that workers subjected to stress are less likely to exhibit a stress response to the extent that they have social support and the extent that they have "hardy" personality styles (i.e., internal locus of control, commitment to self or job, tendency to view change as a challenge).

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Method

The subjects in this study were 90 of the 110 employees in a firm in the assembly and sales of automotive carrying racks in Northern California. An additional 50 subjects were undergraduates from a California State University campus who hold part-time or fulltime jobs. Of the 140 questionnaires distributed, 68 were returned in usable form (49%).

Four main variables were included on the questionnaire:

1. The Stress Diagnostic Survey. This measures levels of stress on the job. There are 30 items broken down into six scales. (Ivancevich & Matterson, 1980)
2. The Perceived Stress Scale. This is our primary measure of stress response. It consists of 14 items. (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983)
3. The Social Support Scale. This is 12 items measuring the amount of support provided by one's supervisor, coworkers, and family or friends. (Caplan, 1975)
4. Hardiness. A 27-item measure developed by the authors and patterned after the work of Maddi and Kobasa. It yields three scales. (Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983)

Results and Conclusions

The various measures had means and variances close to the published norms. The first question was: Does measured job stress correlate positively with perceived stress. The correlations between Stress Diagnostic Survey scales and the Perceived Stress Scale were all positive with a median r of .34 ($p<.01$).

To address the main question in the study, the authors' used the buffer model in their analysis. Analysis of Variance was conducted with perceived stress as the dependent variable and job stress as one independent variable. The second independent variable was either social support or hardiness. (Subjects were scored as either high or low on each independent variable by splitting them at the median.) Support for the authors' hypotheses would be shown by significant significant interaction terms. This support was found for five of the six social support scales but not for the hardiness measure.

As the interaction diagrams below show, for subjects receiving low levels of social support, an increase in work stress is associated with increased perceptions of stress. However, for subjects receiving high levels of social support, increasing work stress is <u>not</u> associated with notable increases in perceived stress.

The results of this research support the theoretical concept that social support can moderate stress effects. Interpretation along causal lines must take into account the limitations of correlational research. It is suggested that managers are in a position to encourage

(or prevent) the development of social support on the job. Hence the implications of the research can be readily applied (of course, cautiously) to the prevention or amelioration of stress effects through management action.

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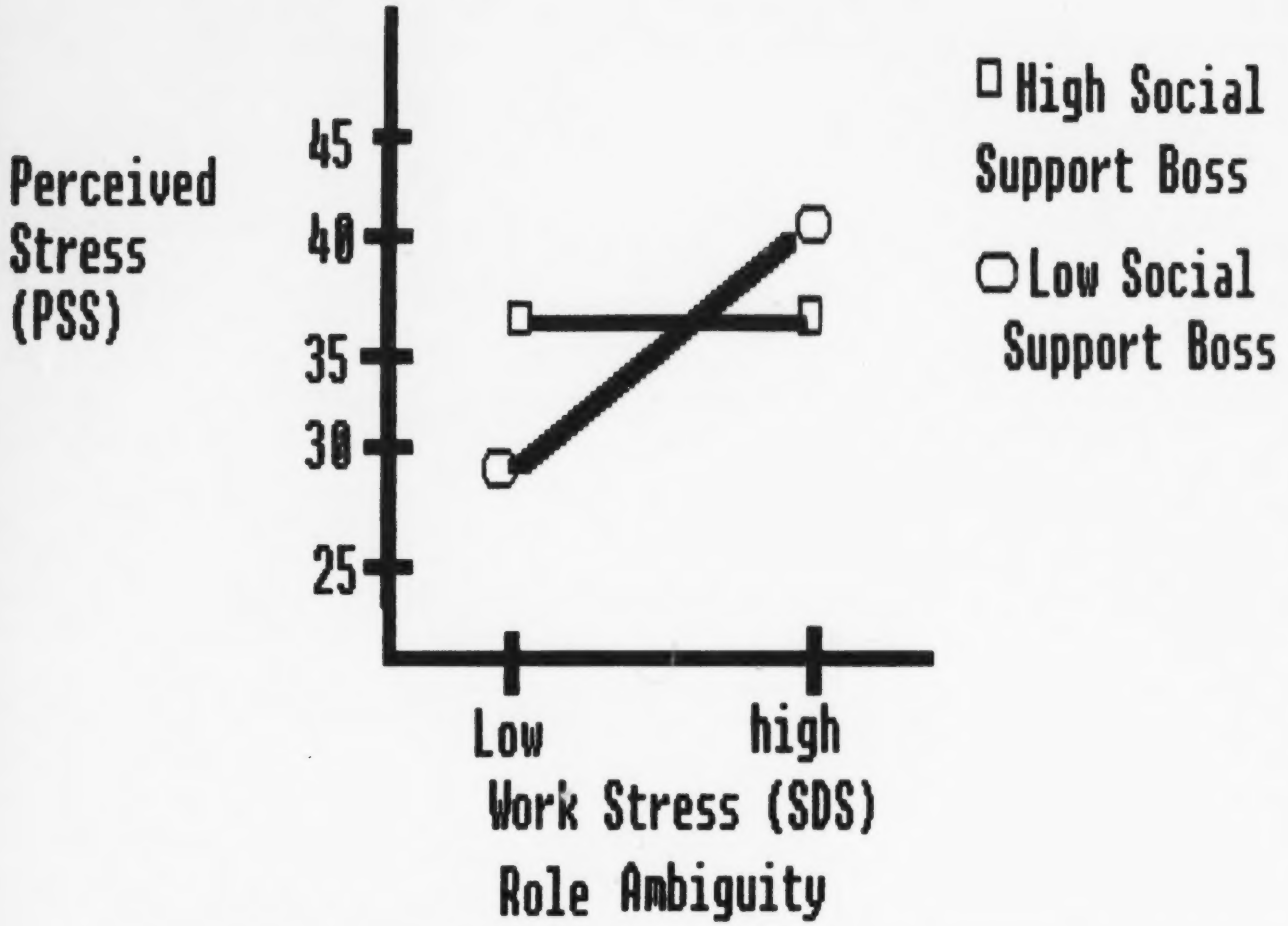

Figure 1. The interaction of Role Ambiguity and Social Support Boss.

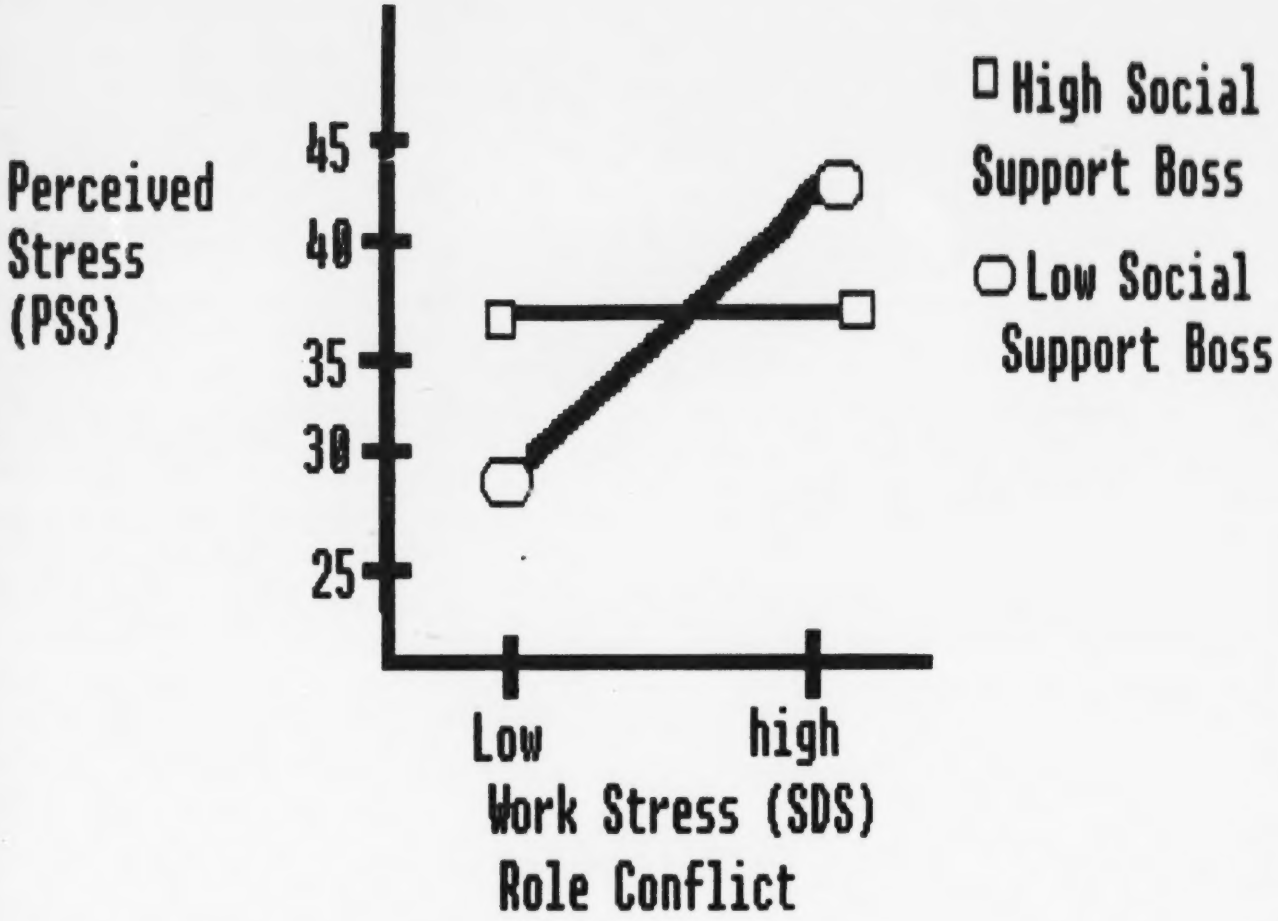

Figure 2. The interaction between Role Conflict and Social Support Boss.

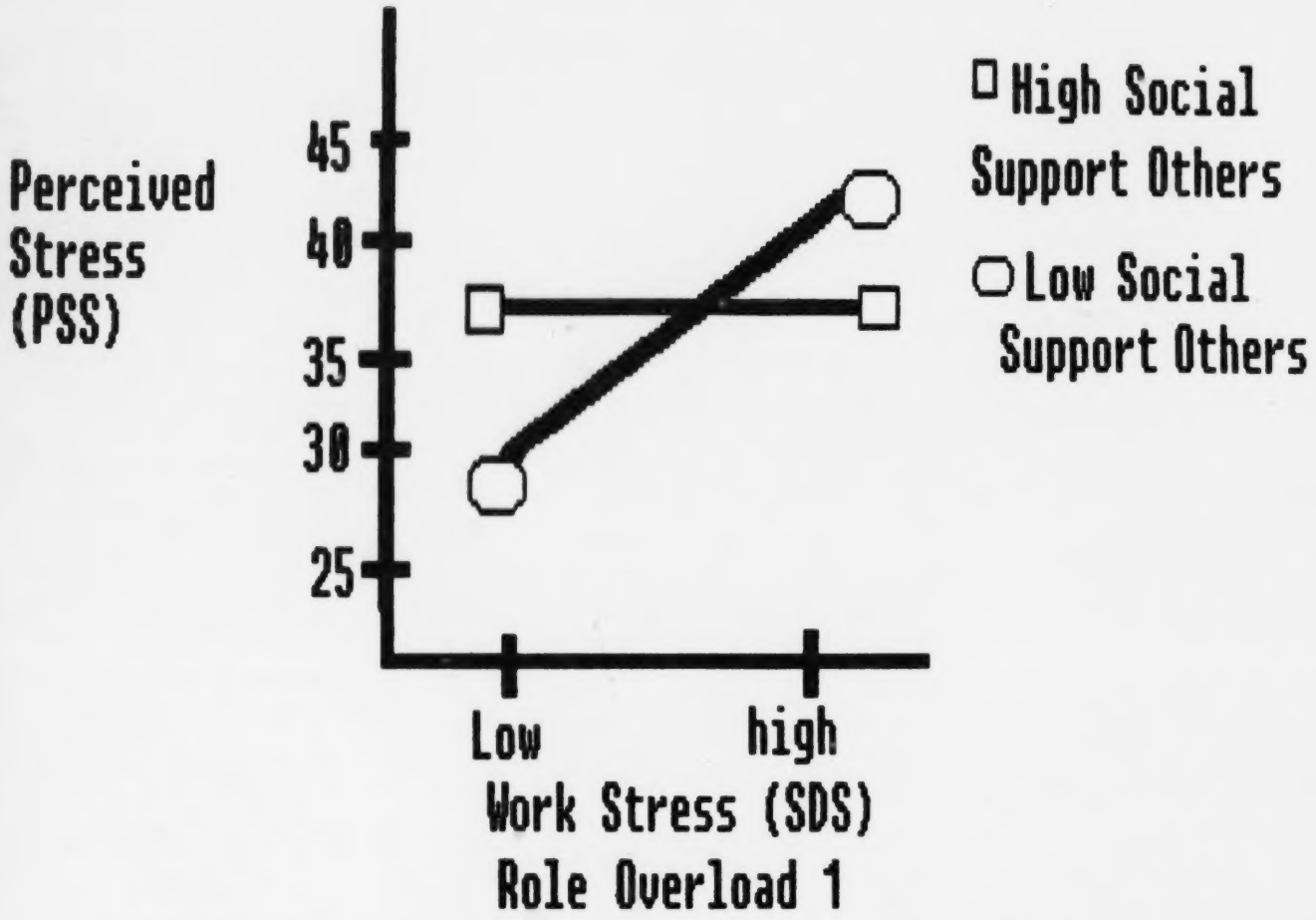

Figure 3. The interaction between Role Overload 1 and Social Support Others.

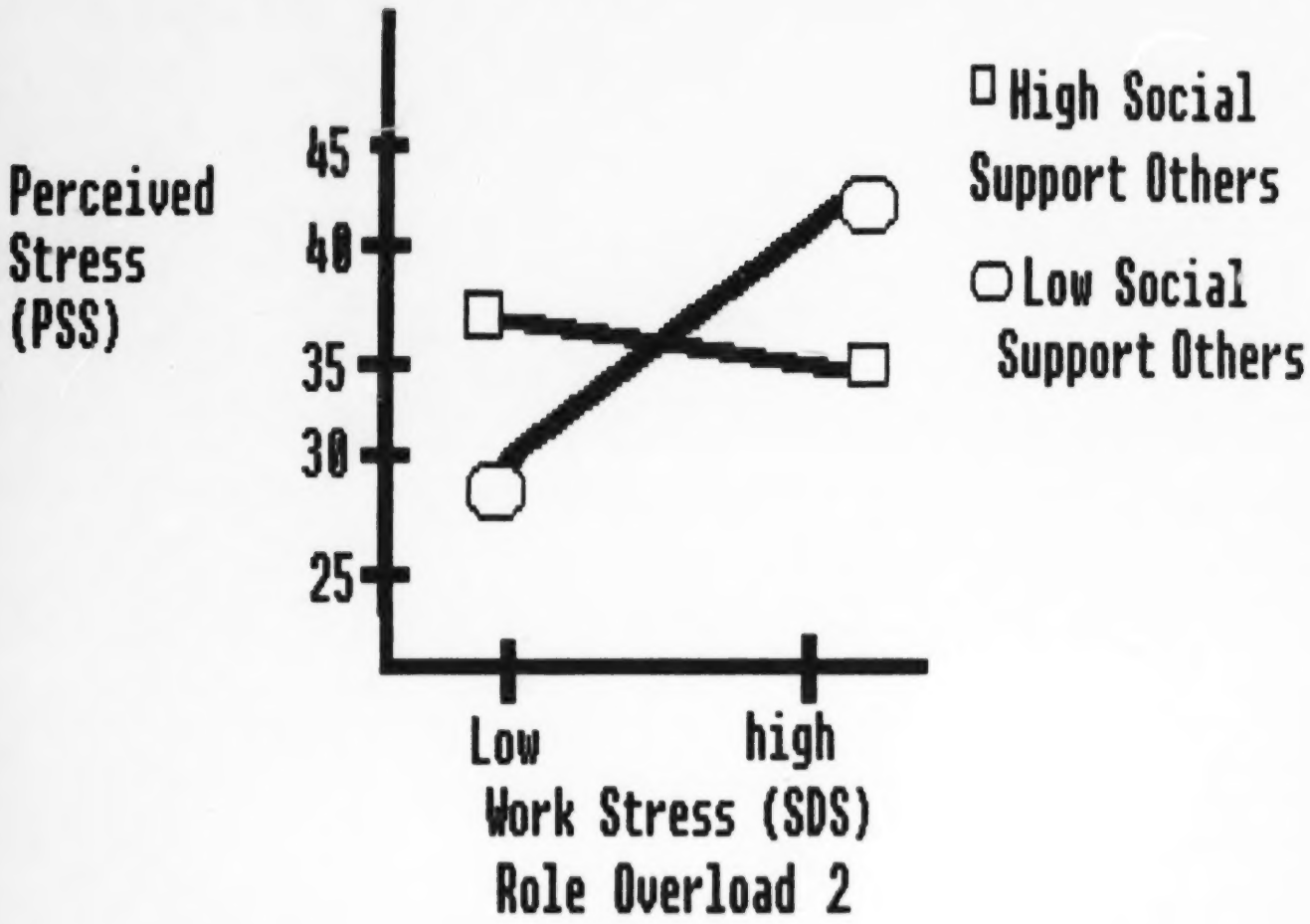

Figure 4. The interaction between Role Overload 2 and Social Support Others.

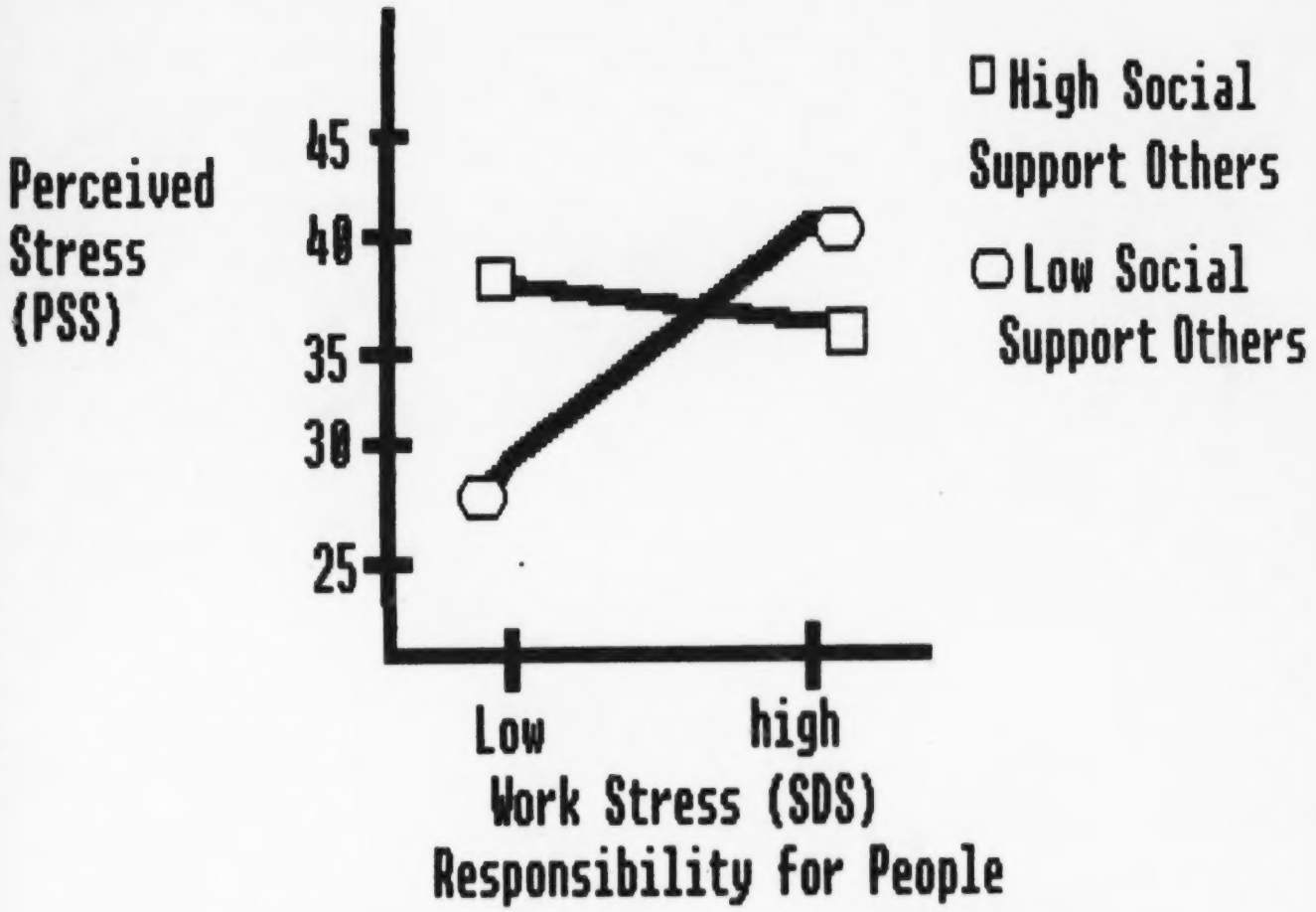

Figure 5. The interaction between Social Support Boss and Responsibility for People.